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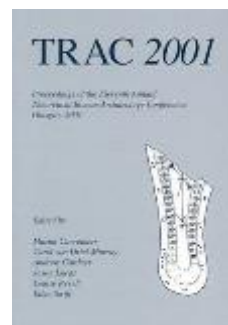
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Pots for Cash? A critique of the role of the 'free market' in the Late Roman economy

James Gerrard

Introduction

The counties of Somerset and Dorset have some of the richest and most varied Romano-British archaeology in the British Isles. It is an area that is doubly fortunate because some aspects of that archaeology have been intensively studied and well reported (for instance Leach 1982, 2001; Leech 1977, 1981, 1982, 1986; Woodward et al. 1993). The identification and excavation of a number of 'high status' fifth and sixth century sites, such as Cadbury Castle (Alcock 1995) and Cadbury Congresbury (Rahtz et al. 1993), in Somerset during the 1960s has also led to this area being seen as crucial to our understanding of the Late Antique/Early Mediaeval transition in western Britain. However, these sites were only identified because of the presence of imported Mediterranean pottery. Since the campaigns of Rahtz and Alcock, virtually no new 'Dark Age' sites have been identified in either Somerset or Dorset. Even if Mediterranean pottery were more widespread or archaeologically visible across the South Western peninsula, the sites it identifies are currently dated to approximately AD 470–550 (Alcock 1995: 110). This leaves us with a hiatus of at least sixty and perhaps as much as one hundred and forty years between the 'End of Roman Britain', usually seen as occurring between c. AD 410–30, and the currency of the Mediterranean imports.

Sixty or one hundred and forty years is a long period of time in terms of human experience. To archaeologists used to dealing in centuries it is not however. If we want to understand how Roman Britain becomes Sub-Roman Britain then that 'tiny' gap must be closed and Sub-Roman sites other than those occupied by the elite identified. Many will no doubt argue that the gap cannot be closed because of the lack of diagnostic material culture dateable to those years (Aston et al. 1998: 838–839). In part this is a valid observation because the difficulties of identifying and dating objects and sequences after the introduction of the last Roman coinage c. AD 402 are very real. Nevertheless what this paper hopes to demonstrate is that it is not just coinage that constrains the dating of Late Roman objects; it is also our current models.

Roman Britain is historically defined by two dates, AD 43 and AD 410. As archaeologists we seek to correlate material culture with these dates. Pottery, coins and mosaics are all seen as diagnostic of Roman Britain. Yet as Creighton (2001) has recently

argued even the most Roman of sites, the fort at Gosbecks, could be pre-Roman according to our historical models. At the far end of the period 'Romano-British' material culture with a *terminus post quem* of AD 388–402 could date to after AD 410. Our desire to pull sequences, such as that at Bath (Cunliffe and Davenport 1985), which are in terms of material culture 'Romano-British' back to AD 410 simply highlights our theoretical and historiographical 'subservience' to history. Material culture seen as being a correlate with the Roman period cannot post date AD 410 simply because if it did it would no longer be Roman! Thus we develop models, such as Fulford's (1979), by which we can shorten the longevity of pottery production.

If we deny 'historical determinism' then we are forced to accept that it is at present impossible to date the end of Romano-British pottery production. This is a bold statement to make perhaps. However, we know that Romano-British pottery occurs in stratified deposits in the latest 'Roman' layers on sites and often in some quantity, above coins of the House of Theodosius (for instance Cunliffe and Davenport 1985; Whyman 2001). So it can be confidently stated that pottery production or at least circulation was still going on post AD 388–402. The lack of dating evidence for many of these deposits and the effect of the magical AD 410 date have led to many pottery typologies being left open ended. Thus an Oxford C61 vessel form is described by Young (1977: 162) as having a date range of AD 350–400+. This is not a particularly satisfactory state of affairs but it does highlight the ambiguities inherent in this topic. However, most orthodox surveys of 'End of Roman Britain' tend to deny these ambiguities and place a terminal date for pottery production usually at c. AD 410–430 (Esmonde-Cleary 1989: 157; Johnson 1980: 155). These dates are not derived from any meaningful empirical data set but rather from a series of models, hypotheses and suppositions (below).

The 'free market' and the end of Romano-British pottery production

The 1970s saw an enormous increase in both the quantity and quality of ceramic data for Late Roman Britain. This led to two enormous typological and distributional studies being undertaken on the major British late fine ware producers based in the New Forest (Fulford 1975) and Oxfordshire (Young 1977). Unsurprisingly there was a drive to use this data to elucidate the economics of Late Roman Britain. In various papers Fulford (1973: 164–165; 1975: 111) argued that the emergence of these late fine ware production centres was the result of a third century economic boom prompted by Late Roman state expenditure on defence projects such as the 'Saxon Shore' forts and town walls. Young (1977: 13) took a somewhat different tack and suggested that the rise of insular fineware production had more to do with a financially astute elite investing their capital in these Late Roman sunrise industries. Once the capital had been invested and the industry set up then the elite could sit back and reap the profits.

Essentially there is no difference between the two arguments. Both Young (1977: 13) and Fulford (1975: 116) saw fourth century pottery production occurring within a 'free market' in which the cost of the product determined its commercial success when compared to its competitors. The success of Oxford products over New Forest pots was

then demonstrated through various distribution maps. These highlighted the greater geographical distribution of Oxford products when compared to those made in the New Forest. Ultimately this 'free market' was destroyed by the political and military instability of the early fifth century. The final blow came when coinage stopped being imported into the Diocese. With the disappearance of coinage came the collapse of commercial exchange and it became economically untenable to continue potting. Thus within a few years or decades at the most of AD 410 no one was producing Romano-British pots anymore (Fulford 1979).

What these arguments implicitly acknowledge is that the Romano-British economy is perceived as being just a reflection of present economics. This is in itself partially a product of the historiographical position of Romano-British studies and Rome within western thought. Many societies have drawn on the image and ideology of Rome for their own ends since the 'Fall of the Western Empire'. This is especially the case in Britain where during the Victorian period we drew on the Roman past to legitimate British society (Hingley 1996, 2000). Due to this the Roman past is not an alien past but one with which we feel familiar. This feeling is manifested in archaeological works on a regular basis. Thus when reading about Hadrian's Wall one could pick dozens of books off of library shelves which talk about the diet and origin of soldiers and how many pairs of woolly socks their aunts had sent them (Johnson 1989). Yet the different and uncomfortable aspects of that past, for instance, the possible evidence for child abuse on the Wall (van Driel-Murray 1995) are ignored and side-lined.

As we have seen (above) discussions of Romano-British economics also view the Roman past as being familiar or the 'same'. Essentially the majority of writing on the Roman economy (above) argues that human nature is driven to "truck, barter and exchange one thing for another" (Smith 1996: 21). These ahistorical 'formalist' economic models which argue for the primacy of the market above and beyond all else are opposed by 'substantivist' perspectives which highlight the social environment (Polanyi 1957). Bizarrely we are left with a situation in which the three hundred and sixty seven years of 'Roman rule' are sandwiched between two periods in which substantivism is the dominant economic perspective (Haselgrove 1987: 17–23; Hinton 1990). An amphorae at Colchester in AD 30 (Cunliffe 1995: 73–74) and one at Cadbury Castle in AD 500 (Fulford 1989) are both seen as the product of socially embedded exchange. Yet an amphorae found at York would be seen as the product of 'market forces' (Ottaway 1993: 43). This peculiar state of affairs only highlights our failure to adequately theorise trade and exchange in the Roman period. I argue in this paper that we impose modern economic principles inappropriately on the past and that these 'formalist' models are not only theoretically but also empirically flawed. If this is the case then it opens new avenues on how we approach the fifth century in Britain.

Competitive potters?

The interaction of the Oxford and New Forest industries is almost always seen as being competitive in nature. The vessel types that the two industries produced were very similar in form and often imitated earlier *terra sigillata* vessels. With the 'free market'

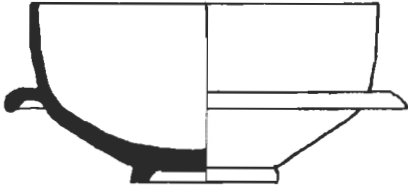


Figure 1. Oxford Vessel Type C51 (after Young 1977: figure 59)



Figure 2. New Forest Vessel Type 63 (after Fulford 1975: figure 19)

model firmly in place, the next logical step would be to plot the distributions of comparable forms in different fabrics. Thus the economic 'success' or 'failure' of a particular industry could be gauged. One particular vessel type demonstrates this type of thinking particularly well. Both the Oxford and New Forest kilns produced variants of *terra sigillata* form Dr. 38, labelled respectively as Types C51–52 (Young 1977: 160, figure 59) (Figure 1) and 63 (Fulford 1975: 64, figure 19) (Figure 2). The distribution of Oxford Types C51 and C52 (Young 1977: figure 45) is widespread and includes much of southern England from Ilchester in the west to the mouth of the Thames in the east. There is even a scatter of occurrences as far north as the Wash. New Forest Type 63 (Fulford 1975: figure 50) is defined by a line which can be drawn from Chichester through Winchester and Salisbury and down through Ilchester terminating at Dorchester in Dorset. Although the distribution maps upon which

this statement is based are now twenty five years old this does not invalidate the conclusion that Oxford products achieved a wider distribution than the comparable New Forest type. In terms of the 'formalist' economic model outlined above the Oxford kilns were clearly more 'successful' at marketing this product (Fulford 1975: 118).

The distribution of New Forest beakers, especially the indented form Type 27 (Fulford 1975: 50, figure 12) (Figure 3), lies in stark opposition to this conclusion however (Fulford 1975: figure 46) (Figure 3). This form has a distribution stretching from Pevensey in the east, north to Silchester and west across to Bath and again it ultimately terminates at Dorchester in Dorset. Clearly this shows a very different distribution from that outlined for New Forest form 63. The comparable Oxford form C20.1 (Young 1977: 152, figure 55) (Figure 4) is surprisingly described as being "not particularly common" (Young 1977: 152) and all Oxford beaker types have a distribution focussed primarily on the kiln site (Young 1977: figure 42). This would suggest in formalist economic terms that the New Forest potters were more 'successful' at 'marketing' their drinking vessels than table ware.

Intrigued by this apparent pattern, I



Figure 3. New Forest Vessel Type 27 (after Fulford 1975: figure 12)

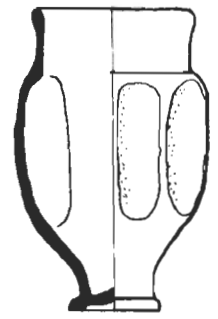


Figure 4. Oxford Vessel Type C20.1 (after Young 1977: figure 55)

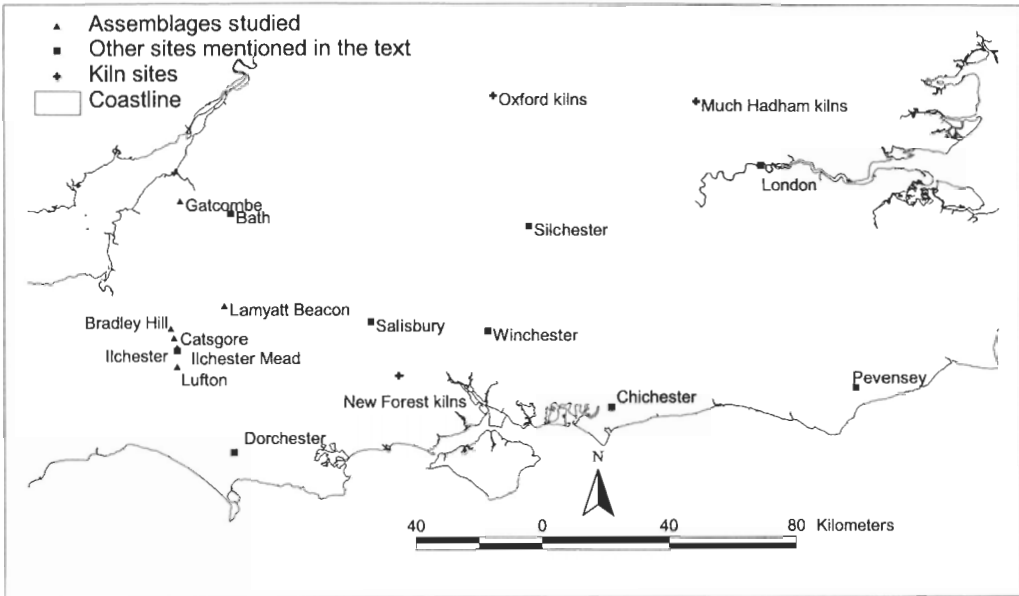


Figure 5. Sites mentioned in the text

undertook a fairly cursory examination of published pottery reports for a small number of sites situated mainly around Ilchester in southern Somerset (Figure 5). These sites were: 1) Bradley Hill (Leech 1981); 2) Catsgore (Leech 1982); 3) Gatcombe (Branigan 1977); 4) Lufon (Hayward 1952, 1972); 5) Ilchester Mead (Hayward 1981); and 6) Lamyatt Beacon (Leech 1986). This area is one which is some one hundred and forty kilometres as the crow flies from the Oxford kilns but only half that distance from the kilns in the New Forest. In the absence of geographical barriers this area should, according to the model outlined above, receive the bulk of its Late Roman fine wares from the New Forest rather than from the geographically distant Oxford kilns. Published sherds were counted for each fabric and were then sub-divided into 'beakers' or 'non-beaker' types. Although this does not appear at first sight to be a particularly rigorous methodology, dependant as it is on how many sherds an archaeologist decides to publish, it is not as unreliable as it might first appear. The pottery from Sites 1 (Leech 1981: 238–248) and 2 (Leech 1982: 153–173) were published in context specific assemblages. Thus every fine ware sherd in a particular deposit was published. They should therefore reflect a reasonably accurate statement of what was in the archaeological deposit. The totals for Site 3 (Branigan 1977: table 3) are not based on sherd counts but on the excavator's estimate of the minimum number of vessels.

With this in mind we can perhaps draw some tentative conclusions from the data displayed in Table 1. It shows that in southern Somerset the New Forest kilns appear to have provided the drinking vessels while the Oxford kilns provided the table ware. This conclusion is reinforced by the quantification of the pottery from Ilchester by both

Table 1. The proportions of New Forest and Oxford beakers to other forms from six sites in Somerset

Site Number	Site Name	Beakers		Other Forms		Reference
		Oxford	New Forest	Oxford	New Forest	
1	Bradley Hill	1	6	29	6	Leech 1981: 238-248
2	Catsgore	5	14	27	21	Leech 1982: 153-173
3	Gatcombe	-	15	102	13	Branigan 1977: table 3
4	Lufton	-	4	8	1	Hayward 1952: 104-107 and 1972: 67-69
5	Ilchester Mead	2	15	36	18	Hayward 1981: 37-51
6	Lamyatt Beacon	-	10	11	2	Leech 1986: 285-293

fabric and form (Leach 1982: table 10) which shows the same pattern. This would suggest that the interaction of the Oxford and New Forest kilns in Somerset was complementary rather than competitive. A similar conclusion can be drawn from some of the distribution maps contained in Swan's paper on the interaction of the two industries in Wiltshire (Swan 1973: figures 2 and 5). If this was the case then it would be time to think again about the nature of Late Roman economics and the role of the 'free market' within them.

A number of authors have noted the peculiar pattern displayed in the distribution of New Forest beakers and reinforced by the particular nature of the above case study. Fulford (1975: 118) suggested two interpretations of the unusual distribution pattern both of which were centred within the free market paradigm. He argued that the distribution of beakers may represent an early phase of New Forest activity prior to Oxford expansion. He also suggested that the Oxford kilns were somehow unable to compete successfully with the New Forest beaker products. A similar argument has also been put forward by Swan. She argues that the New Forest beakers were more attractive and were less susceptible to abrasion due to their harder fabric (Swan 1973: 124).

This 'functional' interpretation can be challenged on a number of counts. If the Late Roman economy was operating on proto-capitalist free market principles, then one might expect the Oxford potters to develop the techniques to imitate both the decoration and fabric of the New Forest beakers. It is also worth highlighting that the fabric of Oxford table ware is harder than that of comparable New Forest wares (Swan 1973: 123); so the Oxford potters were capable of producing hard wares. Yet they chose not to do so with the beaker form. This is not the response of a business in a competitive market. Finally, the idea that the distribution of New Forest beakers may represent an earlier phase of the industry can be discounted fairly easily. New Forest beakers occur in some quantity on sites such as Bradley Hill (Leech 1981: 238-248) where the main focus of occupation lies within the fourth century. It is difficult to see how the New Forest producers could manage to maintain their 'market share' for one particular type of product when the Oxford potters were eroding it. Surely the inhabitants of Ilchester would have acquired Oxford beakers as well as table ware if the beakers had been available? It seems that the Oxford producers chose not to make beakers for some

reason. It does not need to be pointed out that they are not the actions of an industry engaged in a fiercely competitive 'free market', with its potters anxious to exploit available economic 'niches'.

The above discussion has highlighted how one particular facet of fourth century archaeology cannot be confined within the bounds of the formalist 'free market' model. Alone this case study might be ignored. However, in the twenty five years since the publication of modern research on these issues anomalies keep emerging. Fulford and Hodder (1975) argued that the success of Oxford products was due to their reliance on riverine transportation which would drive the cost of the pottery down and make it more attractive to the consumer in the market place. Millett (1990: 172) has demonstrated that this cannot be used to explain the westerly distribution of the ware because the Cotswolds form a formidable barrier to riverine transportation in that direction. Pomel (1984: 80) has pondered how Oxford managed to beat the Much Hadham producers, also situated on a navigable river, to markets in Kent and London. The failure of the New Forest producers to exploit seaborne transport to secure markets along the south coast has also been noted (Holbrook and Bidwell 1991: 81). The 'success' of a migrant Oxford potter at Pevensey, a site which should be saturated with 'cheap' New Forest pots highlights this point (Bird and Young 1981). These anomalies are surely significant enough to demonstrate that the ahistorical 'formalist' models which we impose on the Roman economy are inappropriate empirically as well as theoretically. Special circumstances can, no doubt, be invoked to explain each of these anomalies away. But fundamentally it does not change the fact that each anomaly demonstrates failure of the 'formalist' market driven models as an explanatory tool. We are not condemned to a history of mindless 'truck and bartering' (Smith 1996: 21). The future lies in developing models of the past which are not ahistorical and give importance to social relations above the market.

Much of the research upon which this paper has drawn is extremely particular in its nature. Temporally most of it is situated firmly within the academic context of 1970s Romano-British archaeology. Clearly since the 1970s much has changed in the archaeology of the Roman Empire and academic circles. In this context it is refreshing to see the weakening of what I consider to be the pernicious 'free market' model in the work of some archaeologists. Greater emphasis has been given in recent papers to the role of the state in the movement of various commodities (Fulford 1987: 66–72; Middleton 1983; Reynolds 1995: 106–122; Whittaker: 1983). The work of Allen and Fulford (1996) on Black Burnished Ware in south-western England and building stone in south-eastern England (Allen and Fulford 1999) is particularly relevant in this context. The emphasis placed on what I would term the 'command economy' rather than the market shows at least a willingness to consider alternatives (Allen and Fulford 1996: 269, 1999: 179).

Interestingly this implicit shift in the work of some archaeologists is mainly due to the influence of continental research (Middleton 1983; Reynolds 1995; Whittaker 1983). Thus it is surprising to find the 'free market' alive and well in Roman Britain (Evans 2000: 41, 2001: 30–31; Fawn et al. 1990: 46). By removing its primacy interpretations of the distribution of many pottery fabrics can become far more convincing and satisfying. The easterly distribution of Oxford Ware towards London and into Kent has long been

seen as linked to the Thames (Fulford and Hodder 1975; Pomel 1984: figure 10; above). If we remove the 'free market' the cost of the item is no longer an archaeological issue and other interpretive avenues are opened up. For instance, we know that during the third century there was trade between Britain and the Scheldt estuary (Hassall 1978). Historically the Emperor Julian exported British grain to feed the armies on the Rhine in the fourth century (Millett 1990: 163). Thus if there was a heavily used sea route from Britain to the Scheldt estuary associated with military supply in the third and fourth centuries, then we could speculate that the pottery was travelling with these goods. The distribution of Late Roman pottery imported from Germany, such as Mayen Ware and Mayen Marbled Ware, in Britain supports this suggestion (Gerrard 2001: 42–43). It occurs mainly along the south-eastern sea board and the Kentish area of the 'Saxon Shore' (Tyers 2001). Thus we might further speculate that these are the sites where the grain or other goods from the Upper Thames region was offloaded from riverine and coastal craft and loaded into sea going vessels for the journey to the Scheldt estuary.

This paper began by suggesting that our methodologies for identifying fifth century sites in south western England were at best biased and at worst flawed. Where do the arguments presented above leave this problem? If the primacy of the 'free market' is swept away from the archaeology of the fourth century then clearly the dependence of pottery on the lubricant of commerce, coins, is no longer valid and the orthodox view of the 'End of Romano-British pottery' collapses (Fulford 1979). Yet I have argued that we should perceive of Late Roman economics as heavily embedded and inextricably linked with the desires of the state. If this is so then one can easily argue that the disappearance of the Roman state would cause economic dislocation and the net effects would remain the same: the collapse of pottery production. However, the end of the Roman Empire is characterised more than anything by the scramble for the resources which it was capable of extracting (Wickham 1984). In AD 410 the insular elite, once they recognised that 'Rome' was no longer there, would have immediately sought to consolidate control of those resources to which they would have traditionally had access to as part of the state apparatus. The fifth century is characterised on the continent by the attempts of 'barbarian' leaders to maintain resource extraction and usually their failure (Wickham 1984). If pottery production is linked to the extraction of resources and in particular agricultural surpluses, then there is no reason why it should disappear altogether. However, its nature may be transformed (Whyman 2001).

Conclusions

If, as seems inherently likely, the absence of fifth century settlement in Somerset and Dorset is not a 'real' or 'historical' phenomenon brought about by massive population collapse, then clearly we as archaeologists are failing to address this problem in an appropriate manner. The use of the 'free market' to explain fourth century ceramic distributions has been shown to be theoretically and empirically flawed. Thus it can no longer be claimed that the end of the market necessarily brings about the end of pottery production. The challenge ahead lies in developing new economic perspectives

which are empirically satisfactory and intellectually stimulating. Perhaps rather than concentrating on the distribution of wares we should begin to study the social context in which Late Romano-British potting took place. With this agenda we can aim to examine how that social context changes through time. Ultimately it might be possible to demonstrate that changes in how a ware is produced, perhaps only visible through a slight change in fabric or tempering, are diagnostic of a fifth century date for some 'Romano-British' pots (Whyman 2001: 340–342). One thing is certain however, "the market as the sole frame of reference is somewhat out of date" (Polanyi 1957: 81).

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